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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 002582

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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER ETIENNE YS' VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES: THE VIEW FROM THE DUTCH

REF: THEHAGUE 02554

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES CHAT BLAKEMAN FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The September 25-30 visit of Prime Minister Etienne Ys to the United States comes at a contentious moment in Dutch - Antillean relations. Officials in The Hague have expressed frustration with the Ys government's handling of several sensitive issues (including managing the inflow of Antillean youth to the Netherlands), but still view Ys as their best hope for countering growing Venezuelan influence in the Antilles and promoting a stable transformation of the Netherlands Antilles into smaller, separate political entities. Although Ys' resignation from the leadership of his party puts his political future in doubt, the Dutch believe he will remain a key figure in helping to redefine the constitutional relationship between the Netherlands and the islands over the next several months, at least. All Dutch interlocutors argued that high-level "photo ops" for Ys in Washington and enhanced U.S.-Antillean economic and political relations would bolster Ys' position at home, potentially giving him more flexibility to support key Dutch and U.S. interests in the region. END SUMMARY.

Controversy in the "Kingdom"

12. (C) EMBOFFS met with Rob Verschoor, Senior Policy Advisor at the Kingdom Relations Department of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, on September 16 to discuss Dutch perspectives on Netherlands Antilles' Prime Minister Ys' upcoming visit to the United States. On September 19, EMBOFFS also met with Karel de Vey Mestagh and Anton Schellekens in the Dutch MFA's division of Kingdom Affairs. All three Dutch interlocutors noted that Ys' visit came at an unusually volatile period in the relationship between the Netherlands and the Netherlands Antilles. While the Dutch have grudgingly accepted that the Netherlands Antilles will probably cease to exist as a political entity in the near future, the Dutch want to ensure that critical structural and economic issues (such as the Antilles' outstanding debt) are dealt with in an orderly fashion. Unfortunately, Kingdom Affairs Minister Pechtold's somewhat undiplomatic efforts to steer the process have provoked negative reactions in the Antilles, earned him a mild rebuke from the Dutch parliament, and created the impression in the press of a serious rift within the Kingdom.

13. (C) According to Verschoor, however, Pechtold's tough tone was not entirely accidental, as the minister felt it was the only way to focus the attention of Antillean leaders on legitimate Dutch concerns. The Dutch do not want to discuss plans to restructure the relationship between the Antilles and the Netherlands without concurrently implementing economic reform measures, especially to deal with Antillean debt (now running at about 2 billion euros, an amount equivalent to Antillean GDP in 2005). The Dutch are prepared to back up its rhetoric with action: an Interior Ministry Official told POLOFF and POLCOUNS that the Netherlands will provide the Netherlands Antilles "several million" euros in debt relief if the Antilles can produce a viable economic reform plan.

14. (C) Another issue grabbing headline recently was Dutch Minister for Integration Verdonk's proposal that non-student Antillean youth living in the Netherlands without a clear source of support should be "deported" to the Antilles. (Note: As the Antilles are part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, this would effectively be akin to "deporting" youth from one state to another within the U.S.) During a June visit to The Hague, PM Ys held a public demonstration to protest the proposal and threatened to sue the Dutch government to prevent it from being implemented. Dutch interlocutors confirmed that while these proposals have not been abandoned, questions about their constitutionality will have to be resolved before they are put to parliament, a process which can take months or even years. Verschoor noted that he did not expect any public action on the proposals until early next year at the earliest -- well after the upcoming Antillean elections. In the meantime, Verschoor and the other Dutch interlocutors stressed that the Dutch government will continue to work quietly with Antillean authorities to improve local conditions so that fewer youths

are tempted to travel to the Netherlands without job or study prospects. Pechtold, for example, agreed recently to help finance an Antillean program of mandatory community service for unemployed youth under 24.

BUT YS STILL DUTCH FAVORITE

15. (C) Despite the recent dust-ups, all interlocutors agreed that Ys was someone with whom the Dutch felt comfortable working -- and that he was far better than the likely alternatives. Unlike some of his rivals, they said, Ys valued having a productive relationship with The Hague and understood the importance of implementing structural changes rationally. He also was not afraid to stand up to Chavez by chastising the Venezuelan Consul General in Curacao directly or forcing pro-Chavez politicians out of his coalition government.

16. (C) Verschoor and de vey Mestagh separately volunteered that a "high level photo op" with the President or other senior U.S. officials would help strengthen Ys' bargaining position back home and urged that such an event be considered. Similarly, any measures to boost U.S. tourism to the Antilles or otherwise to enhance economic relations should be encouraged. Whatever his faults, they noted, Ys clearly shared Dutch and U.S. concerns about increased Venezuelan meddling in the region and also supported efforts to combat drug trafficking in the region. If Ys returned from the U.S. without any demonstrable benefits, they added, his political rivals at home (such as Cova and Godet) -- and possibly Venezuelan President Chavez as well -- would seize upon this as evidence of his irrelevance.

17. (C) Following the announcement of Ys' resignation from the leadership of the PAR party on September 19, POLOFF contacted Karel de vey Mestagh again to see if this development changed Dutch views of the visit. De vey Mestagh confirmed that while the announcement had caught them by surprise, the Dutch expected (and hoped) that Ys would remain involved in Antillean politics in some capacity for some time to come, and reiterated his view that gestures of support during Ys' visit to the U.S. would have tangible benefits for U.S. and Dutch interests in the region.

BLAKEMAN